“If you did one thing at a time, you wouldn’t be doing your job”: Multitasking and task rotation in early childhood educators’ work

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**Background:** While early childhood educators’ work is frequently referred to as ‘complex’ there is little empirical research that documents this complexity. In particular, educators’ accounts of the complexity of their work are lacking. The *Exemplary Early Childcare Educators at Work (EECEW)* study is a multilevel, mixed methods project investigating the everyday work of educators, and the conditions that makes services and educators ‘exemplary’ according to Australia’s National Quality Standard. Stage 1 (time use diary) results showed that educators changed activities every 6 to 12 minutes, and over 60% of these activities involved multi-tasking.

**Aim:** To further investigate the themes of multi-tasking and rapid task switching (generated through time use diary data) via focus groups and interviews.

**Method:** Findings are based on focus group and interview data from 111 directors, assistants and room leaders.

**Results:** Participants considered multi-tasking and rapid time switching just ‘part of the job’. Sources of multi-tasking and rapid task switching included: incidental tasks, needing to respond to others’ needs quickly, and the complexity of dealing with many people. Multi-tasking and rapid task switching involved constant decision-making, often being on ‘high alert’, feeling pulled in many directions and coping with incomplete tasks. Effects on educators included: feeling drained, overloaded, having disrupted moods, or, feeling unable to switch off at the end of the day. Reported longer term effects included burnout and attrition. Ways of managing multi-tasking and rapid task switching included: educators being flexible, organised, work effectively in teams and having creative strategies for managing tasks.

**Conclusions:** Multi-tasking and rapid task switching are characteristics accepted by the participants as intrinsic to their job. While participants have adapted to this ‘norm’, they also perceive that multi-tasking and rapid task switching cannot help but undermine the quality of their practice and compromise their well-being.

**Implications for children:** Educators are very good at responding to what you need, and planning experiences for you to enjoy and learn from.

**Implications for families:** Educators’ work requires them to manage many things at once, but they always have your children’s best interests at heart.
Implications for practitioners: Multitasking and rapid switching can be stressful, but with the right supports and philosophy it’s manageable. Keep an eye on the long term effects.

Key words: professionals’ voices, workforce issues, qualitative methods

This presentation relates to the following United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being
- SDG 4: Quality Education
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth